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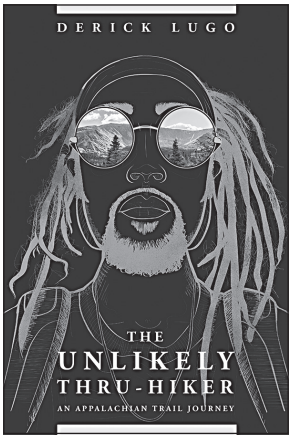


The Unlikely Thru-Hiker: An Appalachian Trail Journey
By Derick Lugo
Appalachian Mountain Club, 2019. 224 pages.
ISBN: 978-1-62842-118-7. Price: $19.95 (paperback).

> Dear Mr. Moose, I promise not to be a nuisance if you show yourself to me. A quick picture, maybe a video. Oh, and I would like to touch your antlers. That's all. Thanks.
>
> —*Mr. Fabulous*
>
> P.S. I'm the one with the dreadlocks.

In anecdotes like this one shared in his thru-hiking blog, city dweller Derick Lugo writes insightful perspectives on self-reliance, reverence for nature, fitness, and fierce determination to endure.

The fish-out-of-water formula has long been a successful plot device in TV sitcoms, big-screen comedies and, in recent years, first-person adventure tales. Bill Bryson had readers alternately guffawing and grimacing in 1998 with his *A Walk in the Woods* (Anchor, 2006) Cheryl Strayed's 2012 memoir, *Wild* (Knopf, 2019), about her emotionally wrought solo hike on the Pacific Crest Trail, was equally hilarious and cringe-worthy.

Lugo emerges as an even more improbable narrator: an inner-city black man better accustomed to taking in stand-up acts at New York comedy clubs than to tramping with a heavy backpack over mountain and valley for 2,184.2 miles from Georgia to Maine.

Lugo is an engaging storyteller whose instincts may seem inclined to go for the cheap laugh, but in truth offer deep insights on his journey. Lugo has a wonderful ear for dialogue, as in this exchange with a hiker named Josh, whom he and fellow backpacker "Swiss" encountered the first day on the trail. Lugo had just struggled to haul his 42-pound pack up 600 tortuous stone stairs leading to a roadside archway at the official northbound start of the AT, when he spotted Josh jump out of an SUV.

"What the—did you skip the STRENUOUS steps?" I ask with amazement.

Josh smiles. "Yeah, I was going to have my parents drive up with my pack while I hiked up the steps, but I didn't want them to have to wait for me, so I rode up with them."

"Yo, those steps were a breeze. You should have taken them," I say, shooting a glare at the wicked steps below us.

"Oh really?" Swiss responds, rolling his eyes.

"No, it was far from easy. You're lucky you got the ride up," I say to Josh.

"The AT doesn't start until we reach Springer Mountain anyway," Josh says.

"Nonetheless, my lazy friend, I'm counting it," I say with a wide-eyed smile.

Later on down the trail, Lugo—a self-described suspicious New Yorker who took on the trail name "Mr. Fabulous"—delivers a delightful riff on trail angels.

Who are they? Why do they do what they do? Why would someone leave treats on the side of the trail?

I'm bewildered as I stare down at an apple pie with a note that says, Take a piece. You deserve it . . . you're a thru-hiker.

If I ever came across a baked good on a sidewalk before thru-hiking the AT, I would simply stroll right past it, assuming it was trash.

To be clear, I do believe most humans are good and are capable of kindness, but for someone who doesn't even know me to suddenly give me a gift? Surely there's a catch.

"Hello, sir. May I interest you in a free phone with a contract of only twenty-four months?" I'm asked somewhere in midtown Manhattan.

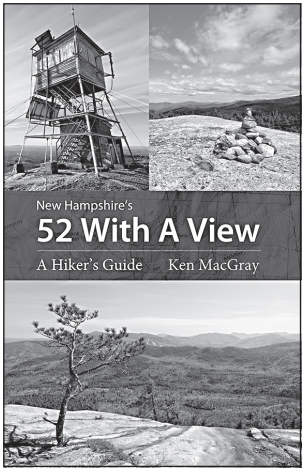
"Sorry, I already have a phone," I respond, and then notice: "Wait, is that a flip phone with a pullout antenna? Do they still make that 1996 antique? You can't give them away," I continue, astonished.

Lugo's book is filled with such *bon mots* that offset the demands of a grueling journey, making it a fun and informative read.

Unlike Bryson and Strayed, who never completed hiking the entire Appalachian and Pacific Crest Trails, respectively, Lugo got to Katahdin.

Both *A Walk in the Woods* and *Wild* became international bestsellers later adapted into major motion pictures, so in a perfect world Lugo will get his shot at glory. He deserves it.

—Steve Fagin



New Hampshire's 52 with a View: A Hiker's Guide

By Ken MacGray
Self-published, 2019. 244 pages.
ISBN: 978-0-578-53116-8. Price: $19.95 (paperback).

This 244-page, well-organized volume does not dwell on the tallest, gnarliest, or most geographically/geologically/historically significant peaks in the Granite State, but only describes summits from which one may peer and exclaim, "Wow!"

Of course, it's a subjective list, sure to provoke debate among alpine cognoscenti—but if you're thinking about lobbying for a revised edition that, say, swaps out the panoramic-challenged Black Mountain Middle Peak in Jackson for the stunningly picturesque Zeacliff overlooking the Pemigewasset Wilderness, forget it.

In 1981, a retired schoolteacher named Elizabeth MacGregor Crooker (later known as Lib Bates after her first husband died and she remarried) moved to town and helped more formally organize the Over the Hill Hikers.

They decided to put together a list of 52 peaks lower than 4,000 feet that have outstanding views—when added to the 48 4,000-footers, they totaled 100 mountains.

As befitting a guidebook, *52 with a View* contains detailed trail information, interesting historical data, and of course, enticing descriptions of sights to behold. Here are highlights of what you can see from 3,165-foot Mount Monadnock in Jaffrey, often called one of the world's most-climbed mountains because of its proximity to population centers:

> With nothing around it for many miles, Mount Monadnock's lofty summit offers unobstructed vistas in every direction, mainly over the relative flat terrain and smaller hills of southern New Hampshire, but on clear days, it is possible to see into all six New England States.

The next several paragraphs go on to tally some three-dozen mountains visible from Monadnock—not a bad showing for such an isolated peak.

Lesser-known mountains get equal treatment.

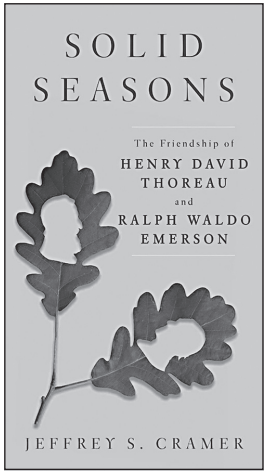
Hedgehog Mountain, rising 2,532 feet in Albany—the lowest of the *52 with a View*—is acclaimed for its east ledges, "perhaps the most scenic spot on the mountain, with a nearly 180-degree panorama highlighted by a close look into the Sandwich Range. The many peaks include Bear Mountain, Table Mountain, Big Attitash Mountain, the Moat Range, Mount Chocorua, and the Sisters, followed by the lumpy ridge of Mount Paugus."

52 with a View should appeal not just to novice hikers but also to peakbaggers looking for new challenges to round out their lists.

I've climbed all 48 of New Hampshire's 4,000-footers (along with the 14 in Maine and 5 in Vermont) but so far have only made it up a handful of the 52 listed in MacGray's book, including Imp Face, Monadnock, Chocorua, Cardigan, and Square Ledge, so I have my work cut out if I want to earn a 100-peak patch issued by the Over the Hill gang.

Hmm. Next, maybe I will hike the 2,000-footers and 1,000-footers.

—*Steve Fagin*



Solid Seasons: The Friendship of Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson

By Jeffrey Cramer

Counterpoint Press, 2019. 368 pages.
ISBN: 978-1-64009-131-3. Price: $26 (hardcover).

Make no mistake, this is a scholarly work. By page 20, liberal use of Henry Thoreau's and Ralph Waldo Emerson's prolific writings has generated footnotes accruing to 60; were such a span represented by a snowstorm, the going might be deep already. But Jeffrey Cramer's lucid, spare writing and deep knowledge join one quotation to the next without seeming effort. The book's two primary characters become familiars, each one easily approached, often via the observation of the other. Cramer has a knack for choosing and integrating his subjects' words, and from that you get sentences and stories that are easy walking. That sums to a wonderful read, both for the general reader interested in Emerson and Thoreau, and for those who feel themselves academic family to these two famous nineteenth-century thinkers and writers.

I spent more than twenty years teaching Henry Thoreau's work and helping 17-year-olds plumb his presence in his and our worlds. And so I knew a number of Thoreau backstories, those narratives that arced together to help shape him. Famous among them was the enduring one that I always thought of as Henry and Waldo, or, on occasion, Waldo and Henry. Surely, without this linkage, each man's life would have been different, substantially so. For starters, Henry's Walden experiment might instead have been called White; or, Life in the Woods (after White Pond), or Flints, after the nearby Lincoln, Massachusetts, pond. Neither title resonates. Or perhaps those two and a half years might have gone over to other experience and work entirely instead of being sited at Waldo's woodlot on Walden Pond.

But, as Jeffrey Cramer points out, "Any biography [study] that concentrates on either Thoreau or Emerson tends to diminish the other figure because that person is, by the nature of the biography, secondary." *Solid Seasons* has a different aim: "In this book, both men remain central and equal." And that is so. To achieve this balance, and so to better know the deep effects each man had on the other, Cramer has done what he does so well: He has gone deep into each man's writings, published and unpublished, and into the

galaxy of others' words surrounding these two central American thinkers. The result is a deeply pleasing three-part book.

Part I—"Solid Seasons"— offers "A Biography of the Friendship." Part II examines "Thoreau on Friendship; Selected Writings on Friendship; Thoreau on Emerson." Part III then looks at "Emerson on Friendship; Selected Writings on Friendship; Emerson on Thoreau"; it then closes with Emerson's famous eulogy of Thoreau.

For me, the tracery of Part I is most fascinating. Cramer finds each man's musings about the other in their letters and journals, and he locates them also in the letters and journals of others, Lidian Emerson, for one. These insights are attached to a scaffold of time that climbs to conclusion with Thoreau's death. The written record Cramer develops reveals the bumpiness of this friendship and the inevitable bruisings when two such capacious minds and varied personalities find (and finally) revere each other. Thoreau's flinty contrarian presence was rarely an easy companion for Emerson's more accepting, universal one. And yet the pull of one on the other is always evident. What a gift that they lived together in time and place.

As if to affirm this gift, near the end of Part I, Cramer repeats Emerson's observation from 1852: "Thoreau gives me in flesh and blood and pertinacious Saxon belief, my own ethics. He is far more real, and daily practically obeying them, than I; and fortifies my memory at all times with an affirmative experience which refuses to be set aside."

Jeffrey Cramer is also a precise reader and writer. Here and there throughout the book, he takes on some of the apocrypha that have grown around Thoreau and Emerson. One footnote's example unhorses the supposed exchange between the two when Thoreau was in jail for nonpayment of taxes: Emerson: Henry, what are you doing in there? Thoreau: Waldo, what are you doing out there? Cramer: "That dialog did not take place." The truth of this relationship, Cramer implies, is ample and deep; no need for fabrication.

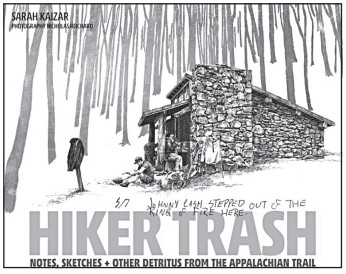
So *Solid Seasons* begins with an interleaving of Thoreau's and Emerson's words and actions as they find, sometimes collide with and come to love each other. Yes, they encounter a famous impasse and episodic disappointments; one would expect no less of two opinionated, brilliant people, who differ in age and temperament. But the book also brings them together with their ongoing efforts to know each other, and finally with Emerson's eulogy for Thoreau that affirms both men.

This return to each other gives body to the 1878 anecdote Cramer uses to conclude Part I, and which I reread at book's end. It comes from a writer's visit

with Emerson near the end of his life. Emerson's memory was fading in some measures, but strong still in much. As the two writers talked, Emerson called out to his wife in the other room: "What was the name of my best friend?" Henry Thoreau," she answered. "Oh, yes," said Emerson, "Henry Thoreau."

Just so, I thought as I closed the book.

—Sandy Stott



Hiker Trash: Notes, Sketches, and Other Detritus from the Appalachian Trail

By Sarah Kaizar

The Mountaineers, 2019. 128 pages. ISBN: 978-1-68051-218-2. Price: $21.95 (hardcover).

"Generally," muses Sarah Kaizar in her introduction, "the choice to take on a thru-hike of nearly 2,200 miles is not a completely rational decision." For Kaizar, the decision was driven by grief after a family death. For Nicholas Reichard, whose photos accompany her pen-and- ink drawings, the decision began when he was an overweight novice without camping skills, and ended with this revelation: "You leave home to get lost in the woods, only to realize . . . at the end of it all, you are found. On your return home, you feel lost again."

In 2015, not knowing one another, Kaizar and Reichard each thru-hiked from Springer Mountain, Georgia to Katahdin, Maine. The trail crosses 250 shelters—lean-tos, really—some of which Kaizar re-created in cross-hatched detail. At the same time, Reichard was taking photos of the travelers he met. Their paths crossed once, and the result is a collage of her sketches, his photography, and excerpts from "damp and well-thumbed" shelter journal entries by writers such as Cheesebeard, Delayed Gratification, and Gucci Avocado. It isn't detritus—for those of us unlikely to make the same not completely rational decision, it's a generous vicarious opportunity.

Journal excerpts are the backbone, here, with recorded mileage, medical reports, and temperature measurements (I imagine astronauts used to keep the same kind of data). But there is also quiet haiku:

Roots and rocks
&
Boots and socks

And, philosophy:

Choose a goal so great
you will never achieve it
until you become the person
who can.

And, field notes with no time for spellchecking:

It's been
a cool day
for hicking.

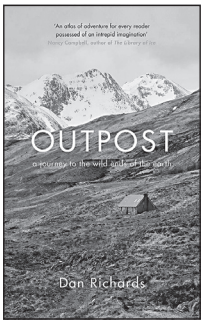
Often entries are illustrated, and some are painted; mysterious history that feels a little like looking at cave art.

Meanwhile, there are Kaizar's sketches—plaintive with their cross-hatching, filled with figures or empty in solitude—and Reichard's photos: Cheesebeard playing cards, wearing his sleeping bag like a sweater; Earth eating what looks, from his expression, like his thousandth tin of noodles; and a portrait of trekking poles lined against a wall, keeping each other company. All the dogs seem happy and open-mouthed, while there are a surprising number of cigarette smokers.

The travelers Kaizar drew and Reichard photographed were "seeking some sort of recalibration," driven by curiosity, grief, trauma, escape, rescue, or some other motivating force. The book is a kind of invitation to others who might want to recalibrate—which, of course, is all of us.

—Elissa Ely

Outpost: A Journey to the Wild Ends of the Earth
By Dan Richards
Canongate Books, 2019. 288 pages.
ISBN: 978-178689-157-0. Price: $21.49 (hardcover).



In his new book, Dan Richards visits a succession of isolated huts and hideaways, from highland Scotland bothies to a sacred Japanese mountain, a lighthouse on the French Atlantic Coast, and so on. His stated purpose is to investigate why people seek out wilderness and what their encounters with it reveal about human nature. Although Richards relates many features of interest in each place, his real enthusiasm is for describing the people he encounters during his journeys.

Richards introduces the book by describing a polar bear pelvis and a photograph of his father with scientist friends, both brought back by his father from a 1980s trip to Svalbard, a remote arctic island that the son visits in the final chapter. While the former object serves as a stimulant to Richards's abundant curiosity, he does not elaborate on his relationship with his father. Perhaps the elder Richards died before he could communicate the lure of the Arctic wild to his son, or maybe visiting Svalbard is a way for the son to reconnect with an aging father. It's clear that the son loves the camaraderie and thrill of adventure, just like his dad.

Richards's prose style is *Outpost's* most appealing quality. Inquisitive and playful, he spices it with self-deprecating wit. I laughed out loud when he describes himself, trying to hitchhike to a field station in the Utah desert, as "Hugh Grant stumbled onto the set for *No Country for Old Men*." In the book's longest and most satisfying chapter, covering his pilgrimage to a fire tower in the Cascade Range that was once manned by Jack Kerouac, Richards contrasts the image of self-sufficiency that the famous author liked to project with the reality of his desperate loneliness. Richards pries open the paradox of members of our highly sociable species seeking out wilderness isolation. In fact, Richards, as he himself acknowledges, doesn't really like to be alone. While working at a writers' retreat in Switzerland, he observes that he does his best work when surrounded by other people; indeed, the chapter largely concerns his gentle, fond descriptions of his peers. They tease him about his amicability, joking that he couldn't have gotten very much work done while at the retreat because of the ease with which he falls prey to distraction.

Though Richards' portraits of his companions and guides are enjoyable, we don't get to know the characters well because they vary from chapter to chapter. Sometimes his detailed recounting of mundane encounters and lengthy landscape description seems like an effort to make up for an absence of drama. He prefers to avoid conflict, as we find out in an early passage when, hitchhiking in Iceland, he is picked up by a pair of argumentative Israelis and a very odd American. At the first opportunity, he exits the car and hides.

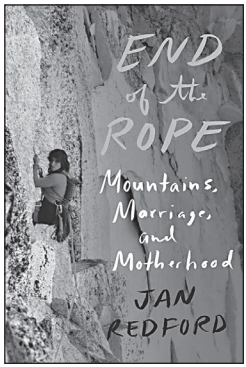
Richards does occasionally meditate on the themes he introduces in the first chapter; here are two of the results:

> The spartan nature of outdoorsing opens us up to the freedom of the unknown. By pulling out the pin that mounts us to a GPS grid we are better able to experience place, space, and time. Without our phones we become better connected. (page 189)
>
> Story spurs us on, helps us stay in the moment and consider the past. It makes us better, human; better humans. (page 246)

Richards's, not to mention Kerouac's, experience suggests that relatively few of us enjoy the prolonged solitude that defines the western conception of wilderness. It seems to me that many wilderness adventurers, especially those of us who visit it in groups and read, write, and post on social media about it, seek out an experience that is fundamentally social, whatever we may protest. It's not just wolves and hypothermia that we want to keep at bay but the sensations of loneliness, desertion, and smallness that we taste just enough of on our visits to provide excitement and to help us appreciate what we left behind at home.

People who fully embrace wilderness do so because they reject society entirely, or have been rejected by it. They are not folks who most of us want to spend time with, for good reason. People like Thoreau and John Muir don't belong to this group; instead, I think of the North Woods Hermit, the Unabomber, escaped prisoners seeking refuge, and other wounded souls who have cut themselves from their fellow creatures to live on the fringes of society. It would be difficult and enormously unsettling to persuade people who voluntarily choose such a life to open up about their decisions, but I think a writer could teach us a great deal about our society if he or she were able to do so.

—Andrew Riely



End of the Rope: Mountains, Marriage, and Motherhood

By Jan Redford
Counterpoint, 2018. 344 pages.
ISBN: 978-1-64009-030-9. Price: $26.00 (hardcover).

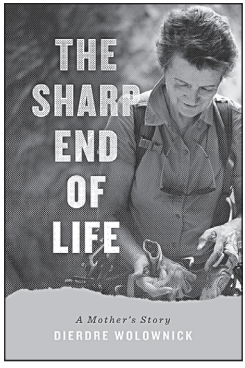
The Sharp End of Life: A Mother's Story

By Dierdre Wolownick
Mountaineers Books, 2019. 256 pages.
ISBN: 978-1-68051-242-7. Price: $24.95 (hardcover).

Alex Honnold could stand up when he was 12 hours old. At 10 months, he could walk, open a heavy patio door, and climb a 6-foot-high slide.

I am the father of a 3-month-old boy who can hardly hold his head up. The idea of a *half-day-old baby* grabbing onto my pinkie fingers and standing for several seconds seems like the kind of tall tale reserved for Paul Bunyan or John Henry.

Honnold's mother Dierdre Wolownick swears by these stories in her memoir about raising a world-renowned rock climber, the first person to free solo the 3,000-foot-wall of El Capitan in Yosemite National Park alone and without a rope. *The Sharp End of Life: A Mother's Story* is an important, insightful addition to the canon of rock climbing literature.



Wolownick writes a fast-paced, entertaining memoir about surviving a stifling marriage and finding herself through outdoors adventures late in life. Once she dispatches with her surly husband and starts following her indefatigable son up Yosemite's peaks, *The Sharp End of Life* becomes fun and joyous, culminating with Wolownick entering the record books as the oldest woman to climb El Capitan, at age 66 (with ropes).

Wolownick is a mother who turned into a rock climber. Jan Redford's *End of the Rope: Mountains, Marriage, and Motherhood* is the story of a rock climber becoming a mother. Read together, the books offer a nuanced, messy portrait of what it means to be an outdoorsy woman trying to juggle family, work, and personal fulfillment.

While Wolownick was born to a conservative Polish family in Queens, New York, and became a well-educated polyglot and community college

professor, Redford was born in the Yukon, barely graduated high school, and had a reputation as a tobacco-chewing, beer-guzzling, school-eschewing, free-loving nomad—traits more typically embraced by "bros" in the macho climbing community. However different their personalities, both women battle their way through unhappy marriages. Wolownick turns away from her classroom and looks toward the mountains for emotional fulfillment. Redford turns away from climbing and returns to education to find personal freedom.

End of the Rope is heavy on angst and heartache as Redford watches people around her die in the mountains (and in one case from free soloing). At one point, she tells the climbing legend Jim Bridwell, who has left his wife and young son home while he travels around the world, "What gives you the right to go off and die?" She gives a stinging critique of lopsided expectations on women to give up their careers and their adventures.

Redford has said she wrote her memoir so her kids won't repeat her mistakes. Both books offer a small trove of advice on parenting, relationships, and living. Do allow your child to climb on the house roof (so long as he agrees to also clean the gutters). Do your taxes on time (or risk having the IRS put a lien on your house). Don't say "I love you" after only three weeks of dating (no matter how strong the urge). Don't rush into a new relationship after your lover dies in an avalanche. Don't sacrifice your passions for your spouse. Don't waffle at the crux.

The Sharp End of Life hit a more personal note for me, as it focuses on a mother's relationship with her son, which is a subject I've written about for *Appalachia* ("Care for the Caregiver," Summer/Fall 2018). Wolownick writes with a power to inspire those feeling too old to rethink their physical limits. Her humorous tales of climbing with her son might also inspire children to take their parents into the mountains more. If Honnold could make time to guide his mother up El Cap, then I should be able to bring my mother for a winter hike in the White Mountains (she's been asking me).

I also recently became a father, which gave me a more intimate appreciation for that bit about Honnold being able to stand up at 12 hours old. Did Honnold become a great climber because he was born great, or did these stories about his innate abilities push him to live up to a higher potential? *The Sharp End of Life* is an insight into letting your children pursue their passions and the seemingly impossible.

—Stephen Kurczy